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U.S. policy on spy satellites risky, Pentagon official says

By Walter Andrews
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Recent rocket failures show that U.S. reliance on a few highly capable spy satellites may be more risky militarily than the Soviet approach of relying on more, less sophisticated ones, a senior Pentagon official said yesterday.

Frank J. Gaffney, deputy assistant secretary of defense for nuclear forces and arms control, also took NASA to task for failing to encourage industry competition in the development and production of launch boosters that could place satellites and other "payloads" in space for less cost.

Mr. Gaffney said the Soviet approach to satellites "involves more survivability ... [and] less sophistication in favor of both greater numbers and greater diversity," and that it would be "inherently more resilient" than the U.S. system in the event of war.

At a breakfast meeting with reporters he said, "from a military planner's point of view," he would prefer the "option to adopt a highly redundant, highly diversified posture, much as the Soviets have."

If there is ever a war between the two superpowers, the evidence is that the Soviets are prepared to spread the conflict to space — "going after everything we have there," Mr. Gaffney said.

He declined to discuss specific American intelligence satellites or their capabilities. But non-government space experts have warned that the crash last month of a Titan 34D space booster, said to be carrying the last KH-11 reconnaissance satellite, could cause "a gap" in America's spy satellite capability.

The only remaining KH-11 could begin to wear out late next year, or early in 1988, the experts said, before an improved KH-12 satellite could be launched by the space shuttle, whose rocket boosters are being redesigned because of the January disaster.

Mr. Gaffney said the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's concentration on the highly specialized capabilities of the space shuttle has discouraged competition.

"It's the old story of the best being the enemy of the good," he said. "We have precious little in the good areas and a few things in the best area."

"There is no domestic industrial [launch] capability to fall back on," Mr. Gaffney said. He said it was his personal opinion that launch booster competition was needed but noted, "this is something I think is under active discussion in the administration."

He said the United States has adopted the same kind of approach "in the intelligence arena."

"We've gone for optimized systems that take maximum advantage of the best that our technology has to offer," he said. "We've tended to make things very expensive and therefore place a good deal of reliance upon them as individual assets."

He said there has been little "redundancy" [in back-up systems] or "robustness" built into intelligence satellites that would make them "resilient against somebody who decided he wanted to take out your satellites."

Mr. Gaffney said U.S. intelligence satellites failed to "see" the April 15 explosion of the Soviet Chernobyl nuclear power plant partly because they aren't "arrayed" to monitor such non-military installations.

But, he said the Chernobyl catastrophe went undetected "also because we have gone the route of relying not on redundancy, not on duplication ... but in favor of highly specialized and therefore numerically limited and therefore inevitably on technically somewhat limited capabilities."

He said this American philosophy of relying on a limited number of highly advanced monitoring satellites "tends to reinforce the need for on-site inspection" of Soviet compliance with arms control agreement provisions.

Mr. Gaffney said the value of the Soviet approach of a larger number of less capable satellites was shown in the 1982 Falklands war between Britain and Argentina when the Soviet Union was able to "vastly augment" its ability to monitor what was going on there.